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ABSTRACT

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO LEARNERS' REACTIONS TO LEARNER TRAINING FOR SELF-ACCESS LISTENING

Elspeth Wardrop and Kenneth Anderson (IALS)

Abstract

Learner training (LT) is felt to be important for students to make effective use of self-access facilities, yet there is uncertainty about how it should be done and how it will be received. This study examined students' reactions to two versions of LT for listening, finding little negative reaction, but many useful comments on content, manner and timing of LT, as well as the kind of listening material they wanted; it also examined students' current use of self-access listening, and what governed their choices. It revealed that classroom-based LT had some good effect, but that a more consistent approach was necessary.

1. Background

The present study arose out of our interest in making self-access facilities more effective. At the Institute for Applied Language Studies we run a year-round full-time General English programme, the students being 50-80 in number, mainly European and Japanese, mainly in their twenties. There is one timetabled self-access session per week in addition to out-of-class hours when students may freely use our Self-Access Centre.

A study carried out last year into how students used the timetable "Self-Access Session" (Davies, Dwyer, Heller and Lawrence 1991) revealed that lower level classes (elementary to intermediate) tended to use the listening resources more than other resources and more than higher levels. Following that study our concern was to develop listening resources in general, with particular attention to our provision at lower levels. Before attempting this it seemed necessary to answer three questions:

1. What do learners do with listening materials?
2. How can we develop the range of materials?
3. How can we help inefficient listeners improve?

The first question is to some extent answered in the first stage of the present study; the second became the subject of a separate study.

The third, however, was more complicated. One obvious answer appeared to be some form of learner training, with the intention of raising students' awareness of the process of listening in L1 and L2, and of suggesting strategies which might prove helpful. Yet we felt ambivalent towards the concept of learner training, finding it possibly patronising, and fearing that students might feel likewise. We felt it would be impossible to measure the effect of such training, since any measurable improvement in performance might be attributed to exposure through the English-speaking environment

(including the classroom) or other factors affecting individuals; it would, however, be possible to obtain a cross-section of students' reactions to such training, and establish whether any of them did react negatively, and whether they themselves claimed that it changed their behaviour and contributed to improved listening performance.

The aims of the present study were, therefore:

1. to find out how learners claimed they selected and used self-access listening materials;

2. to gauge learners' affective reactions to learner-training;

3. to discover whether and in what ways learners believed our learner training materials had influenced their approach to listening.

2. Review of literature

In order to place this study in the context of current theory and practice, it is necessary to refer to three bodies of literature: that on learner strategies, since primarily that is what we aimed to teach; that on learner training for self-directed learning (i.e. training learners to take responsibility for decisions affecting their language learning and, to an extent, for autonomy); and that on the process of listening in a foreign language.

As regards the literature on general learner strategies (see Rubin 1987 for the historical background), research at first focused on identifying and classifying the strategies adopted by good learners (see for example O'Malley, Russo, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares and Kupper 1983). Brown and Palinscar (1982) made a useful contrast between metacognitive (knowledge and regulation of learning) and cognitive (manipulation of learning materials to improve performance and enhance learning) as well as socio-affective strategies. This classification has been widely adopted in the second wave of research, which is testing the assumption that learners can usefully be trained to adopt good strategies (e.g. O'Malley 1987). As regards the effect of strategies on listening in particular, O'Malley (1987: 141-2) found that a combined programme of matacognitive and cognitive strategy training helped to a certain extent, depending on the difficulty of the task, and on the length of time devoted to training. However, he was looking at the effect of two strategies only; a broader choice of strategies might have shown different results.

In the literature concerning learner autonomy and self-directed learning, it has been generally accepted that learner training is necessary, both psychological and methodological (Holec 1980, Dickinson 1987, 1988). However, Sheerin (1989: 34) suggests that the term "learner training" be applied to the teaching of practical skills, while helping students to a deeper understanding of learning and of their own style be termed "learner development". She further suggests (Sheerin 1991) that practical learner training may lead learners indirectly to change their psychological standpoint. This latter approach we adopted as more respectful of learners' individual learning styles and less time-consuming that Holec's "deconditioning" and "reconstruction" process (Holec 1987).

Turning to the literature on listening comprehension, the general current view of the process of listening is perhaps most clearly expressed by Anderson and Lynch (1988:

13), who argue for "the listener as active model-builder", showing how the listener draws on schematic, contextual and systemic knowledge to help make sense of the acoustic signals. As Wenden (1987: 160) points out, many current listening materials contain exercises aimed at developing this skill, but fail to identify it explicitly as a generalisable set of strategies. The value of telling learners the reason for what you are doing - "informed" as opposed to "blind" learner training (Wenden 1987: 159) - is fairly well established, and has been called for in the teaching of listening (Rixon 1986; Underwood 1989). While teachers at the Institute report that they habitually explain the rationale of exercises to students, it seemed appropriate to standardise this information in our learner training materials.

3. Methods and materials

The study was divided into three stages:

1. First interview: student's background and present use of self-access listening. (See Appendix.)

2. Student's examination of the Learner Training Materials.[1]

3. Second interview: student's reaction to materials.

3.1 First interview

The purpose of this interview was to have background information on the students, in case any correlation should emerge between attitude to LT on the one hand, and learner characteristics on the other.

It was also intended to investigate what use was made of Self-Access Centre's listening materials, as a follow-up to the investigation mentioned above (Davies et al, 1991). In that, student activity in the Self-Access Centre was noted as "listening" as opposed to "reading" etc; now we wanted to discover in more detail what they did and why.

3.2 Description of materials

Learner Training: *Introduction to Listening*, Versions A and B.

Annotated guide to books and cassettes available at intermediate level: *Guide to Intermediate Listening Materials*.

Versions A and B contain basically the same information in the first four pages of each. A is written in question and answer form, and so might be seen as more linear in approach. Questions on the first page are designed to heighten learner awareness of the process of listening in their own language and of the role of background knowledge, expectations/predictions and purpose. The second page suggests ways of improving listening outside (socio-effective and metacognitive strategies), while the third page addresses those who feel a particular need to work on listening in the study room. It asks them to identify their own problems from a list of seven. It asks the students to consider what kinds of exercise might help these problems, and on the fourth page it

gives some strategies. Finally there is a short guide to intermediate materials at the end of A.

Version B is more schematic and more detailed: it might also be seen as more directive, since it does not ask many question. It asks students if they recognise any of 12 problems listed on the first page and points out that they are common and can be overcome. On the second, third and fourth pages, seven strategies are suggested for developing one's listening ability. Pages 5 and 6 give general guidelines for work in the Study Room, while pages 7, 8, 9 and 10 are based on Sheerin's *Self-Access* (1989: 83-87), which offers clear guidelines to students on how to manipulate materials to suit their own needs - cognitive strategies which they could use both at the Institute and afterwards on returning home, as autonomous learners.

3.3 Second interview

There was no set form for this for two reasons: firstly, the variety in level and interests of the students; secondly, the restrictive nature of a set format - we hoped by using an exploratory mode to elicit a wide range of opinions, and thereby discover what to focus on.

Areas covered in the interview:

1. General reaction to LT materials.
2. Timing - when should LT be given in a course?
3. Presentation - did they like the look of the materials?
4. Changed behaviour - did the students do anything differently now as a result of reading the materials?
5. Which did they prefer, Versions A or B, and why?
6. Was the materials Guide (annotated catalogue of listening materials at intermediate level) clear and informative?
7. Any other recommendations regarding listening materials, or the Self-Access Centre in general?

3.4 Description of sample

The smaller number of students in the second interview was simply a result of lack of time; however 15 was the target for the complete study, and the extra 9 students participating in stage 1 are a useful bonus for the extra dimensions to the study related in 3.1.

Students Participating in the First Interview

Total:	24	
Level:	6 Pre-Intermediate	(German, Thai, Saudi, Hungarian, Japanese, Spanish)
	9 Intermediate	(5 Japanese, 3 Italian, Chinese)
	7 Upper-Intermediate	(3 Japanese, 2 Saudi, Italian, Spanish)
	1 Advanced	(Spanish)

Students Participating in the Second Interview

Total:	15	
Level:	3 Pre-Intermediate	(Japanese, Spanish, Saudi)
	6 Intermediate	(4 Japanese, Italian, Chinese)
	4 Upper Intermediate	(2 Japanese, Saudi, Spanish)
	1 Advanced	(Spanish)

4. Discussion of results

The limited numbers mean that the data can only be viewed as qualitative, not quantitative; moreover, since the interviewers were known to the subjects, positive comments are discounted as being possibly pure courtesy, except where backed up with a specific reason.

4.1 First interview: use of the study room listening materials

Only two interviewees used the self-access listening facilities on a daily basis; the rest were evenly divided among twice-weekly, weekly and occasional users. This is the pattern we would expect in an English speaking environment, where even lower level students can generally find more interesting and useful exposure outside the Institute: the role of the Self-Access Centre for listening is to provide more easily accessible listening material which can be studied intensively.

Choice of materials depended primarily on title and apparent interest-value, than on what learners perceived as meeting their needs (e.g. social, functional exchanges), and occasionally on teachers' recommendations. Choice of unit seemed more likely to depend on chance - students would start at the beginning, or wherever the tape happened to be. This suggests that in extending the range of materials our first consideration should be to provide a wide variety of topics judged likely to satisfy the range of interests most typically displayed by our students, and that some teacher-led practice in using an index to select units for particular reasons, and then locating these on the tape (counter numbers per unit are given but are never failsafe) would be a useful part of learner training.

As for the selection and use of exercises, approaches varied from those who started at the beginning and worked through, following instructions, those who listened and merely thought about the exercises, those who just listened, sometimes using the transcript, to those who listened to note useful language, with the majority following instructions and doing the exercises given. This is reassuring to an extent, in that we had suspected that many might spend all their time just listening, or just listening and following the tapescript, and not varying their approach. At least the use of published exercises ensures some variety in activity, and some purpose to listening, and some students were using their own initiative in deciding how to use materials.

By far the most important feature of a listening exercise was felt to be an interesting topic. Usefulness and challenge were two further desirables, followed by ease.

Finally, the learners were asked what "special tricks" they used to help them: the use of repetition and dictation were mentioned several times, whereas strategies available in everyday life, such as listening to children, paying attention to context and body language, were mentioned only by a few individuals. Here, answers were affected by how interviewees interpreted the question, which was left open, including both study room listening and real-life. Had they been given a list of strategies to tick, they might have identified many as their usual practice; nevertheless it is interesting to note what they chose to highlight.

4.2 Second interview

4.2.1 Changed behaviour and reaction to materials

The timing of the project, with most students being interviewed for the second time in the second half of term, meant that we were unlikely to find students changing their behaviour as a result of reading the LT notes they were interviewed on, and indeed the majority said they would probably not do anything differently as a result of reading these notes. Six students said they had learnt nothing new from these materials, but four of these felt they were worth reading as reinforcement and reminders, more detailed than the training received in class: two stated that although they had tried all these things before, they would now do so more consciously, feeling justified in knowing what they were doing and why. One also mentioned that it made her more aware of what was involved in L1 listening - "you listen to the ideas, not the words".

Four students said they had already changed their behaviour: three as a result of being in Scotland and two as a result of teachers' advice. Our observation suggests that several more had also changed, even if they had not recognised it, probably for the same two reasons, the former being more important. The main change mentioned was a shift in focus from word-for-word comprehension to getting the message, with a corresponding change from total panic or confusion to relaxing and following the gist.

The only strategies commented on as new were the materials based on Sheerin (1989), in particular the ways suggested of using a tapescript. Five students said they had changed the way they used tapescripts as a result of reading this: one said she would not have thought of using tapescripts and reactive listening without reading this, another commented that a procedure he had adopted from this was also used in class, but he had not thought before of generalising classroom procedure to self-access work.

The weakest student interviewed commented that although he felt the strategies would be useful, his greatest need was to build up basic vocabulary, and that only then would he be able to benefit by this advice. This concurs with O'Malley's (1987) finding that where the level is too difficult, strategies may not help.

Explicit criticism of content was confined to one student disagreeing with certain strategies he did not find useful, such as listening to the television. He made the point that certain strategies "did not suit his character". Implicit criticism might be read into those interviews where the students said they felt the materials were useful, or helpful, but did not state why, and gave the impression that they did not feel personally affected or involved.

One student who reacted very positively to the materials was an extremely quiet and withdrawn young Japanese who had never shown such animation before: he found this type of approach far more useful than classroom LT, and, like another student, suggested similar LT for every skill and language area. He was perhaps the most marked example of a tendency we noticed, that the most positive reactions came from the quietest students, perhaps those who felt too shy to speak up and ask questions in class. Another student commented that she found it very comforting to read that problems which she had thought were hers alone were both common and surmountable. This confirms our impression that not only do the weakest students need this kind of attention, but they appreciate it and would like more.

4.2.2 Timing and presentation

Five said LT would be better given at the beginning of term, although two also agreed that it would perhaps make more sense after the student had some experience of listening and difficulties, and would be able to identify better with what is written. The fact that many interviewees had difficulty finding time to read the materials, and were doing it only because they had been asked to in the context of this project, suggests that the initial LT should be done partly in class.

All students commented favourably on the use of pictures and white space: the pictures made the LT more relaxing to read, less formidable, funnier, and easier to understand (in general they were intended to support the meaning of the text). As regards wording, one student made very strong criticism of those sections using "crew-only" language (although the words he identified as jargon raised no comment from other students, who may have found other sections difficult; another argument for initial handling in class). His was perhaps the most interesting interview, in that being older and used to a position of power, he was prepared to be analytical and forthright. He began by attacking the whole project roundly for its confusing presentation, but ended up making very detailed and constructive remarks. He commented on the difficulty of writing guidelines, striking a happy medium between being exhaustive and being concise and clear, and found the Sheerin materials the best example of this.

4.2.3 Comparison of versions A and B of LT materials

There had been no conscious attempt to make the language in one easier than the other, but the students' general perception was that A was easier and B more detailed, with the weaker students preferring A and the upper levels B. Two students gave no explanation

for their preference. It may be that the inductive question-answer approach combined with a lower information load in A is better suited to lower levels - two of the more advanced students found A "too easy" - and that the upper level students are better able to cope with a higher information load, for example the range of cognitive strategies suggested in Sheerin (1989).

It was generally agreed that help was needed in finding appropriate materials, but that the format used was not helpful: a grid indicating features of materials and a task sheet leading students to sample a variety from their level would be more useful.

5. Conclusions

The results showed that our fear of students objecting to and feeling patronised by LT was unfounded, at least as far as our sample went: we deliberately included three students considered most likely to object, being European, sophisticated speakers of two or more other languages, who as successful communicators probably already used many of the strategies suggested. At the same time, a number of students found it helpful for one or more of the following reasons: it confirmed their intuitions and reassured them about what they were doing; it reminded them of things they tended to forget; it reassured them that their problems were not unique; it suggested strategies or techniques they had not thought of. This suggests that LT is worth instituting in a more regular and consistent fashion.

As regards timing, it should be started at or near the beginning of a course, with a classroom session followed up by a handout summarising the outcome of discussion. The model we propose is a recording of extracts exemplifying a wide range of text types, accompanied by discussion questions aimed at raising awareness of the processes involved in L1 listening and how these can be transferred to L2 listening. Attention should however be paid to maintaining awareness of the connections between classroom work, study room work and listening in real life through classroom discussion, individual progress sheets, learner contracts and regular tutorials.

There are clearly also implications for extending the range and type of listening materials for self-access, the two types specifically mentioned by students in this study being authentic materials of intrinsic interest and specially prepared materials focusing on particular problems.

Within the limitations of our study, we have succeeded in reassuring ourselves as to the reactions of learners to LT, worked out a feasible model for implementing it and received indications as to the sorts of self-access materials students want and need. Research now needs to focus on low level learners with particular problems with listening, and on how learner training can be adapted to meet their particular needs. Further research would also be useful on the extent to which poor listeners who have failed to develop adequate listening strategies on their own actually adopt strategies suggested in LT, and how far this improves their performance. We have a long way to go before LT really helps those who need it most.

Note

1. Copies of these Learner Training Materials are available from the authors on request.

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Appendix: First Interview

1. Student details: name, age, sex, nationality/L1, occupation, length of stay.
2. Language learning background.
3. Use of English outside the classroom.
4. Motivation.
5. Attitude:
   - 5.1 When you listen, do you try to (a) understand every word or (b) try to pick up the message?
   - 5.2 If you can't do you (a) give up or (b) try to pick up something?
   - 5.3 What do you find difficult about listening?
6. Using the materials:
   - 6.1 How often do you use the study room?
   - 6.2 Which materials do you use?
   - 6.3 Why?
   - 6.4 How do you choose a unit to work on?
   - 6.5 Do you do all the exercises in a unit?
   - 6.6 If not, how do you choose?
   - 6.7 How do you decide what to do next?
   - 6.8 What is important to you in a listening exercise (interesting topic, usefulness, fun, challenge)?
   - 6.9 Afterwards, do you think about whether the listening exercise has been worthwhile?
   - 6.10 Do you have any special tricks to help you understand what you hear?